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Dan Chaon: 02-25-2004

Dan Chaon

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Chaon:

After Jonah's mother died, he took the old car and drove to Chicago, the city of his birth. It seemed as good a place as any in which to become a different person. He was 22 years old, and his intention was that he would never think of his past again. He would forget his mother, his grandfather, the shack-like yellow house. He'd forget the long humiliating desert of high school and afterwards a job washing dishes in the cafeteria of an old folks' home. A period of months and months and months when he felt certain that he'd finally reached the very bottom of his life. All that would be erased, he thought. He remembered the way his grandfather had described the death of Jonah's grandmother years and years before Jonah was born. Escaping this world, Jonah's grandfather had said with a wistful admiration. As if the grandmother's death had involved something masterful and Houdini-like, instead of a mere car accident.

It was an idea that Jonah felt friendly toward. Escaping, he murmured under his breath as he crossed the Missouri River into Iowa. And then he corrected himself. Escaping, he said. Escaping. He'd made a list of ways that he could improve himself, just to start out with. Grammar. Posture. Training himself to say library instead of liberry. Training himself to say picture instead of pitchure. Straightening his cowardly stoop and squaring his shoulders when he walked. Looking people in the eye when they spoke to him. Smiling. Easy stuff.

As he drove along I-80 as glowing green and white signs caught his headlights and shimmered with the names of exit numbers and towns, he listened to a tape he had borrowed permanently from the Little Bow Public Library. "Fifteen Steps on the Ladder of Success," it was called. And as he edged the speedometer upward toward 80, a man with a resonant vowel-thick voice read aloud. Happiness and unhappiness were choices that we made, the man said. They were states of mind. Problems have no life of their own, the man explained. Problems are mirages that seem to exist from a low state of mind. And they gain importance only because we choose to give it to them.

Jonah listened, running his tongue over his dry lips, the glare of westbound headlights passing over his car, over his face, sliding up the body of the old Mustang like the palm of a hand. His mother's ashes in an urn in the passenger seat beside him. The stuff the man was reading sounded a bit like bullshit to him. But he hoped it wasn't.

[Silence]

Panning:

Welcome to the Brockport Writers Forum, a longstanding reading series and video archive collection of conversations with writers. I'm Anne Panning, co-director of the Writers Forum. And with me today are Dan Chaon, fiction writer. And Rachel Hall, fiction writer and professor of creative writing at SUNY-Geneseo.

Dan Chaon's short story collection, "Among the Missing," was a finalist for the 2001 National Book Award. It was a New York Times notable book of the year, and has been translated into several languages. His first collection, "Fitting Ends," was published in 1996 by Northwestern University Press, and was recently reissued by Ballantine Books. His novel, "You Remind Me of Me," will be released this May 2004. His short stories have been included multiple times in the "Best American Short Stories," the "Pushcart Prize," and the "O Henry Award Series."

He's with us today to talk about his short fiction as well as his novel.

I'd like to welcome you, Dan and Rachel. Thanks for being with us. I'd actually like to start with a question about your first book. And really how that came to be. I know there's -- I've read some things about it that you had a mentor, or you had people sort of working with you. Just could you talk a little bit about how that book came into being?

Chaon:

Well, where should I start?

Like start in junior high school?

Hall:

Yes, sure.

Chaon:

I'd be -- well, I mean, this is something that I've always had an ambition to be a writer sort of from a very early age. And I was interested in comic books and I was interested in all that kind of stuff. And when I was in junior high we were encouraged by our teacher to write to a writer that we admired. And I wrote to Ray Bradbury, because I loved his work. And he actually wrote back. And I'd sent him some of my stories, which were basically imitations of Ray Bradbury stories. And he wrote back and told me how much he liked them. So I was fairly early on--

Panning:

Wait, how old were you when you did that?

Chaon:

Like 13 or 14. And so I was fairly early on encouraged. I went to Northwestern and worked with Reginald Gibbons. And some of the first stories that are in "Fitting Ends" were actually written as an undergrad. Under Gibbons' tutelage. Then I took a few years off and did, you know, the usual bartending and waiting tables type stuff. And then went to grad school at Syracuse. And a few more of those stories were written while I was in grad school. And then there was the whole post-grad thing where I wandered around doing various odd jobs and taking care of children. And then the rest of the stories were written during that period. So I eventually was able to publish the collection with Northwestern University Press. And my undergraduate teacher, Reginald Gibbons, was the editor.

Panning:

Okay, so you had somewhat of a --

Chaon:

Yes, somewhat of a good mentor.

Panning:

A good mentor, somebody in your court.

Chaon:

Yes.

Panning:

But it sounds like they were written -- so those stories were written -- some of them must be quite -- they're your earth stories. And then you wrote them during grad school, and then beyond grad school.

Chaon:

Right.

Panning:

So it covers -- how long of a year span do you think it would cover?

Chaon:

Gosh, it covers like, I mean, I guess it probably covers maybe eight years of work.

Panning:

Okay.

Chaon:

Of, you know, early period from, you know, like the end of juvenilia.

Panning:

Right, right.

Chaon:

On.

Panning:

Well, my other question was going to be, how was it to revisit that collection? Because I know this one is now out, you know, with Ballantine. So it's a reissue.

Chaon:

It's reissued.

Panning:

And it has some stories cut and some stories added.

Chaon:

It has some stories cut -- a couple stories cut. And a couple added.

Panning:

Couple added, yes.

Chaon:

It was interesting. I mean, there's -- there's a point where, you know, you become basically a completely different person than you were when you wrote the stories. And there's a temptation, I think, to go back and correct the person that you were. I think I tried pretty much to resist that temptation. There were occasional points where I was like, oh, I'm using that metaphor way too many times; I need to cut at least one of them. There were places where I knew there were mistakes that I'd made that I did change and tweak a little bit. Like, you know, people wearing red in a black-and-white photo.

Panning:

Right.

Chaon:

How did they make that mistake?

Panning:

Right. It seems like a rare opportunity, though, for a writer to be able to do that. I mean, it must have been really great to --

Chaon:

It was.

Panning:

-- to kind of clean it up but as you wanted it now.

Chaon:

Yes, yes. And my editor at Ballantine had very specific ideas about reorganizing the stories. And they were very different from Reg Gibbons as well. You know, he had -- I think he had a different vision of what the book was going to be than Reg did. Which was -- that was an interesting process too.

Panning:

Mm-hmm.

What does Reginald Gibbons think of this one? Have you talked to him about --

Chaon:

I have never talked to him about it.

Panning:

-- about the new --

Chaon:

I've never talked to -- I don't think -- I had never talked to him about the reissue. And I guess I probably should at some point to find out what he thinks.

Panning:

Or not.

Chaon:

Or not. Yes, I mean there was -- well, we don't need to get into the whole issue of Northwestern University Press. But he's not working for the press anymore, so.

Panning:

Okay.

Hall:

There are two things that I wanted to follow up on. I don't know if this is out of order or whatever. But one thing I'm wondering about is, you said they had different ideas of how to organize the collection. And I wonder if you could talk about how one organizes a collection. Because "Among the Missing" holds together so beautifully.

Chaon:

That's partially my editor's work with the collection. I did have -- I mean, as I was working on it I had very specific ideas of what kinds of stories I wanted to write. And where certain stories would go in the collection.

Hall:

Ooh, you did? Okay.

Chaon:

Yes, and I actually had a little chart --

Hall:

Ooh, an outline?

Chaon:

It was not an outline. But it had, you know, I think I had about 20 stories when I first submitted this to an editor, and it got cut down. But I had, you know, I had it all marked up. Like, okay, this one takes place in Nebraska. This one takes place in Chicago. This one's first person; this one's third person. This one has a crazy mother in it; this one has a crazy mother in it. So I'm like trying to stack them up so they seem like those things are separated a little bit. And trying to have like, I guess what I imagined were different types of stories. I tend to gravitate towards extremely unreliable narrators. So I was like, oh, I better write a story that has a reliable narrator this time.

Hall:

Which one is that?

Chaon:

That's the last one. That teenage boy is supposed to be very reliable and very lovable. I think he is. As opposed to -- I mean, I originally started that last story with the father as the narrator. And that was another one -- he was like crazy and unreliable and told lies to the reader, and, you know.

Hall:

Right, right. And he tells that like to his peasants, right?

Chaon:

Right.

Hall:

About the brother's suicide.

Chaon:

Right.

Hall:

Yes, so he would be unreliable, yes.

Chaon:

So yes, I was trying to do -- you know, make sure that there was lots of variety. And then, you know, that the stories have some sort of interlocking relationship. And then I say all that, but then my editor totally changed my original order. So he had ideas of his own, so --

Panning:

Well, I want to ask a couple things too on that.

Did you ever do the thing where you lay them all on the floor and sort of see how this one opens and how this one ends? To see how it would fit with the next one's opening? You know what I mean? Did you ever do that thing where you spread it all out and see if the beginnings and ends all kind of work?

Chaon:

I have a -- I use a chart. I charted. I use a chart method.

Panning:

You're not a layer-outer, you're a charter.

Chaon:

No, I'm a charter.

Panning:

Okay.

Hall:

But does the chart have like the last line and the first line?

Chaon:

Yes, it has all of those things.

Panning:

Okay, because that seems really important. Because you don't want it to sound too similar to the one that follows.

Chaon:

Right, right.

Panning:

So do you see -- you said you wanted some kind of interlocking thing. Do you see a narrative arc going through that? I mean not that they're linked, but --

Chaon:

No, I see -- I guess I see a thematic arc of some sort. And I see sort of an emotional progression of sorts.

Panning:

It's true, because the last story, "Burn with Me" does have a sort of -- not that the other ones aren't sincere, but there seems a sincerity in that narrator. And that makes sense with what you just said about that narrator, you're trying to create a reliable narrator there. There seems a very rich sincerity. And then if you have the setting being what it is, and the father/son relationship. Because we've seen so many father/son relationships prior to that that are very disconnected and alienated and dysfunctional, I would say.

Chaon:

Right.

Hall:

Yes, and that narrator understands something in the end. In a way that some of the other characters have continued to miss, to miss things. Yes.

Chaon:

Yes.

Hall:

Like understanding that the story that his uncle has told to him is -- that there's some cruelty in that.

Yes.

Chaon:

Yes.

Hall:

He's more in touch with himself.

Chaon:

Interestingly enough, he's the only person that was raised away from Nebraska in the whole collection, he was raised far away.

Hall:

Is that how it works?

Chaon:

He's not in that environment, so he's like more settled in some bizarre way.

Panning:

Do you see Nebraska as your fictional home? If you -- do you see -- in the novel do you come back to that?

Chaon:

It's -- yes, set in Nebraska and South Dakota primarily.

Panning:

Okay, okay. So that's where you -- even though you don't live there anymore. How long since you've lived there?

Chaon:

Twenty years.

Panning:

Okay.

Chaon:

I haven't lived there since I left high school.

Panning:

Okay.

Chaon:

So -- yes, it's still my place. For better and worse, I suppose. I haven't been able to write about Cleveland or Ohio. I'm thinking maybe this -- the novel that I'm working on now will be set in Ohio. But I don't know for sure.

Hall:

What is it about Nebraska?

Chaon:

I guess partially it has to -- I mean, I think the landscape of your childhood has some sort of primal thing for you. And there's something, I mean, you can hold up that picture.

Panning:

Yes. Photo op.

Chaon:

Sure, there's something really -- there's something really bleak.

Panning:

I love that.

Chaon:

And intense about the landscape that's -- that really holds sway over me.

There's a Willa Cather quote in "My Antonia" where the narrator says that he basically stopped believing in God when he saw Nebraska. Between that earth and that sky, what would be would be. Because there's just such a bleakness to it.

Panning:

My memories of driving across Nebraska are truck stops. Just huge, huge, mammoth truck stops. That kind of --

Chaon:

It has -- I mean, it's like the surface of the moon, a lot of depth. I hope nobody from Nebraska ever sees this, like from the Nebraska Tourist Bureaus.

Hall:

Yes, this is not PR for Nebraska.

Panning:

Nebraska truck stops is --

Chaon:

It is -- I mean, it is in a certain way. Because there's still something really compelling about it. It's not quite the -- it's like the end of the mid-west and the beginning of the western states. So there's a lot of cowboy stuff there too. And I think it may be that some of the emotional states that I'm interested in exploring seem to fit in that landscape better than anyplace else.

Panning:

Well, I think you needn't worry about any Nebraskans.

Because I think you write about it -- when you do set the stories there, and many of them are set there, there's warmth and a fondness. I don't think there's any kind of, you know, condescension or -- you know.

Chaon:

No, I don't feel like I'm making fun of people.

Panning:

It feels like a real affinity.

Chaon:

Yes.

Panning:

Yes, maybe we were just making fun of Nebraska.

Chaon:

Right.

Panning:

But really there is a -- there's a sense of longing too, I think, for that place. A lot of the characters go away. In "Among the Missing" especially -- go away and then they come back. You know, and it seems like they want to stay but they can't really find a way to re-insert themselves into --

Chaon:

Right.

Panning:

-- that place.

Chaon:

Right. I mean, like -- I feel very close to the characters in "Big Me." You know, because everybody gets scattered. But there's still that sort of weird imaginary place that does and doesn't exist back in the, you know, back in the home state, the home place. And there is a kind of nationalism among Nebraskans about Nebraska. That seems stronger than many other states.

Hall:

Mm-hmm, like a pride in it since nobody's like --

Chaon:

Right. I mean, it's like --

Hall:

Defensive.

Chaon:

Very defensive. I mean, we're not as cool as the other states that surround us, for some weird reason. Or we don't think we are. Even people from Missouri look down on Nebraskans.

Panning:

I think that's maybe accurate, yes.

Hall:

But it strikes me that like New Yorkers, for instance when you say I can't write about Cleveland, or I haven't written about Cleveland, they would think, what's the difference between Ohio and Nebraska? You know, it's just all sort of Midwest. But there is.

Chaon:

It's a big difference.

I mean, I think at least for the people that live there -- and I think, I mean, I think the Midwest maybe stops somewhere around the first half of -- or maybe the first third of Nebraska. And then it starts becoming the Great Plains and the West. And that -- I think there's a lot less -- there's a lot more sort of weird libertarianism about that. And a lot more weird sort of pioneer independence and, you know, they're -- as opposed to in Omaha, I think there it would not be that uncommon for your dad to get in a fight at a bar, for example.

[Laughs]

Panning:

Well, do you have -- do you still have people back in Nebraska? And how do people react back there to your work?

Chaon:

Well, my parents both died in '96. So I haven't -- I don't go back very often. A lot of my family is scattered. I have a brother and a sister who live there. And I don't feel like they have too much interest or concern about my work. You know, my sister is a housewife and lives in, you know -- is pretty involved with the kids. I actually shouldn't say just a housewife, she does day care out of her home. But she never went to college. And my brother's a truck driver. And he's pretty much not much of a reader.

Panning:

Do you know if they've read your books? Do they have your books? Have they read them? Have you talked about it?

Chaon:

My brother said that he tried to read some of the stories but he found them so boring that he couldn't continue.

Panning:

Ouch.

Chaon:

So -- yeah. Actually there are some stories that I've written that have been particularly meant to get my brother's interest.

Panning:

Really? In this? Or no, in -

Chaon:

In "Among the Missing," particularly.

Panning:

Do you want to say what they are? Is that asking too much?

Chaon:

No. I mean, I think that there were stories that had like criminal things going on in them, like --

Panning:

Oh, to make it less --

Chaon:

"I Demand to Know Where You're Taking Me" and the -- "Here's a Little Something to Remember Me By," both had sort of had sort of criminal elements that I was sort of attracted to. Partially because I wanted to see if I could write a story that was interesting to my brother.

Panning:

I like that.

I mean, that's a good **challenge**, in a way. That's a good influence.

Even though he's not reading them, he's influencing --

Chaon:

He did like -- he did like them.

Panning:

-- your work.

Chaon:

And for whatever weird reason, he particularly liked the story in which he is sort of satirized as a character. The character of the foul-mouthed rapist character is really very much based on my brother.

Hall:

The sexy rapist?

Chaon:

Yes, and he was like, oh, that was a pretty cool story. I thought that -- lady was crazy. I loved it when she killed the bird.

Hall:

That's a great -- that is a great story, I think.

Panning:

It is.

Hall:

It's really a risky story. Because, I mean, because it's a sexy rapist. And then there's, you know, animal abuse in the end. Yes, so that was meant for your --

Chaon:

It was in some ways meant for my brother. I mean, I think the impetus of the story came from a time when my wife and I were back in Nebraska visiting. And my wife's from Philadelphia and she's not used to rednecks at all. And we were sitting out in the garage with, you know, some of my cousins and my brothers. And we were drinking beer and, you know, acting in a fairly redneck way. And my brother started having this conversation about his political views. That were really offensive to my wife. And I was like just don't; he just trying to get you mad. But she took the bait. And like -- my brother's also somebody who has for his whole life had this weird relationship with my girlfriends. Like he seems to get very interested in the women that I'm interested in, in this sort of like -- I don't know what, just weird way. So I could tell that part of what he was doing is like, you know how when you're in junior high you show you like girls by teasing them. I mean, he wasn't in junior high, he was

a man by this point. But he was definitely teasing my wife, in a kind of flirty way, but in a way that was making her furious. And I was like, I have to write about this in some way. And then when I started writing about it, I kept getting more and more extreme. Like I added this parrot, and I added like these serial rapes, and made the situation for the wife much more dire in a lot of ways. But that was really the impetus behind it, was that culture clash moment. Where I was really -- I felt like I was in between old redneck world and new college professor world.

[Laughs]

Panning:

Mm-hmm.

I never would have -- that's a good story. Because you know if you had -- not that it's autobiographical because you're inventing all the rapes and everything. But I never -- if I had to point to a story that spelled autobiographically-driven, or experienced, that wouldn't be one. You know, so that's a really nice surprise to the story. And I'm believing in the story, that -- I mean, I think we're led to believe that the brother is guilty. I mean, everything -- I know you probably don't want to -- I don't even think I want an answer.

Chaon:

Okay.

Panning:

But -- it's such a nice walk on the line of everything points to that. It's never said. There is -- you do introduce the possibility of doubt in that he would have had to do it if -- he slept overnight at their house that night. So he would have -- he really would have had to go in the middle of the night and then come back and be asleep. So, you know, I like that I'm pointed, you know, I'm not left completely to not know. But there's enough of a doubt that it kind of nags.

Chaon:

Yes, well, I love -- I mean, I really do love stories that have no solution. I mean, that's --

Panning:

Yes, we don't read for solutions, really.

Chaon:

No, but, you know -- there's something that I think is really disappointing when, you know, you have one of these great stories that's like an urban legend or whatever, like the Roanoke colony that disappeared in the 1600's. And, you know, what could have happened to them? They were there and they just disappeared. And they left, you know, they left their houses with plates still on the table. And then, you know, some scientist comes along and says oh, it's clear that they all died of typhoid. You're like no, that's no fun. So I like the stories where you can just sort of worry about what could possibly have happened. And there's a few stories -- especially in "Among the Missing" that are like that.

Hall:

Mm-hmm. Yes, like the mother in the title story.

Chaon:

Right, yes.

Hall:

Where did she go? Where is she? Yes, yes.

Chaon: And I like the truth that we don't know. And you'll never know.

Because that's the best thing -- that's the best thing about that mother

is that she can really disappear and we have no idea what her motives are.

Hall:

Yes, because in a way her son hasn't known her at all before. Yes.

Panning:

Well, you said of your own work, you have -- on Random House you have an author essay or something that you wrote about your own work. And you said something about liking mystery.

Chaon:

Yes.

Panning:

Other people say it, too, about your work. But you know, you say -- it reminds me of the Flannery O'Connor of mystery and manner, to try to get the mystery in.

Chaon:

Yes.

Panning:

And I know -- I don't even want to ask this because I know you probably have to talk about this a lot, but you -- since you yourself say it, you said, I wanted the collection to be -- I can't quote you exactly, if you can help me, I wanted the collection to be sort of like ghost stories.

Chaon:

Yes.

Panning:

But set in non-supernatural --

Chaon:

Right.

Panning:

-- conditions, right?

Chaon:

Yes. I mean, absolutely. And I think -- I started out as a reader and as a writer as well. The first book that I ever got was called "Alfred Hitchcock's Ghostly Galleries." It's like a big book for pre-teens. And it has all of these stories of, you know, the stories that are -- classic supernatural stories. I loved that book; I read it over and over. And then I, you know, the people that I originally started turning to when I became interested in reading were like Shirley Jackson. And Daphne du Maurier -- is that how you pronounced her name? du Maurier? I don't know.

Hall:

The woman who wrote, "Rebecca," right? Yes.

Chaon:

Yes. I loved those books. And, you know, then when I went to college and I, you know, was learning that realism is better for some -- you know?

Panning:

Mm-hmm, because you do get that.

Chaon:

You do get that. I kind of turned -- I kind of, you know, like tried to -- I tried to write all my Raymond Carver stories. And -- but there was something about doing that that nagged me, like I wanted -- I still wanted to have those -- I still wanted to write genre stories that had literary elements, I guess, you know? And there used to be people that could do that, do you know? Like Edith Wharton has tons of ghost stories.

She's a very literary writer, but she -- that was the tradition that I really loved that I felt like I really wanted to reacquaint myself with. And to explore myself. Because I felt like my experience of the world and my experience of late 20th Century America was very supernatural. I mean, it felt like everything was full of ghosts and full of, you know, monsters and terror.

Panning:

Why? How so? What do you mean?

Hall:

Yes, define "ghosts." Define ghosts.

Chaon:

I think -- I mean, maybe it's partially just my own experience. But I -- had lost a lot of people over those years and during my 20's, a lot of people that were close to me had died. The town where I grew up dried up and blew away.

Hall:

Mmm, ghost town.

Chaon:

It was a ghost town.

Panning:

What town was it?

Chaon:

It was called Bronson. It was about ten miles outside of Sydney. Neither of which are you expected to know where that is. And it was about a hundred miles east of Cheyenne, Wyoming.

Panning:

Oh.

Chaon:

So it's in the middle of, you know -- and, you know, there are all these little towns on the Union Pacific railroad lines that had grain elevators. And then, you know, it stopped being important at a certain point for, you know, for every little town to have a grain elevator. Because all of these farms became owned by, you know, multinational conglomerates. Instead of by family farmers. So, you know, that whole -- the needs for these little towns vanished.

Panning:

Right, mm-hmm.

Chaon:

And, I mean I was -- and this may be just me, but it seems like it was a generational thing. But during the '90s I felt like there was something really aimless and purposeless about what was happening to me and the rest of the people in my generation.

Panning:

Was that your post-graduate school life, when you sort of were --

Chaon:

Yes, when I was in my 20's and early 30's and I felt really lost a lot of the time. And that felt very supernatural in some ways. It didn't feel like there was the kind of future that a lot of other people in earlier generations seemed to have a clearer fix on what their future was. Maybe that's not true. Or at least they seemed to have a clearer fix on what their purpose was.

Panning:

Maybe the roles were just more clear-cut, I think.

Chaon:

Yes, yes; I think so. And I was also in a weird position because I was like the only person I knew -- I had my first kid when I was 23. So that was, like I was the only person I knew that had small children.

Panning:

Yes; were you in graduate school when you had your kids?

Chaon:

Yes.

Panning:

Okay. Yes; pretty rare.

Chaon:

So, you know, it was a very twisted sort of psychological world for me, landscape.

Panning:

I sense that what you just described is a feeling of not sure what the future means. Where even though you had a family and you had education, I sense that in a lot of the narrators in "Among the Missing." They return almost for a visit -- a lot of them come back for visits or something. And just can't -- there isn't a clear-cut purpose to what they're doing.

Hall:

Mm-hmm.

Panning:

And I think that's interesting that you choose those for narrators. Instead of picking some -- a more sort of active, clear role --

Chaon:

Right.

Panning:

-- character who you could have be the narrator.

Hall:

Right, mm-hmm.

Panning:

The narrators are in some kind of search. There seemed to be searching and longing and quest kind of going in a lot of them.

Chaon:

Yes, I mean, I was going through my "Am I really going to be a writer?" phase. And, you know, should I go to law school?

Panning:

No.

Chaon:

I still think -- I still wonder, you know?

Panning:

I wonder if all English majors think that. Because I thought I was going to go to law school, did you?

Hall:

Yes, I thought -- I wanted a briefcase, though. That's why -- yes, a little attache case.

Chaon:

But it would be something to tell people.

Hall:

Yes. Well, it's like that Lorrie Moore story, "How to Become a Writer."

Chaon:

Right. I mean, I think you just feel very embarrassed most of the time. Especially if someone who's not an academic. Like you're, you know, you're sitting in the doctor's office and somebody asks you what you do,

do you ever say, "Oh, I'm a writer." Because then they're like, "Oh, uh-huh."

Hall:

Crazy person, yes.

Chaon:

Or else, even worse, "Oh, that's interesting. Have I read anything that you've written?"

Panning:

Oh, yes, yes.

Hall:

Can I read the ghost question?

Panning:

Yes.

Hall:

Because it seems like a lot of the characters have left home and left a past. And often left like a whole social class, milieu. And that seems to be like a kind of a ghost too. So I guess I didn't -- I mean, like one of the characters, Trant, in "Late for the Wedding" talks about his ghost marriage. And so it's ghost because it's -- there's nothing tangible about it.

Chaon:

Right.

Hall:

And because he doesn't talk about it.

Chaon:

Right.

Hall:

So it's sort of like we all have ghosts.

Chaon:

Right.

Hall:

Because we all have these pasts that we carry with us that we don't understand.

Chaon:

Right.

Hall:

I mean, is that one of the ways you're understanding ghosts?

Chaon:

Yes, well definitely. I mean -- and I think the thing that I loved about that 19th Century, early 20th Century fiction, you know, people like Edith Wharton or Charlotte Perkins Gilman or whoever, is that they used those ghosts to manifest all of that stuff that, you know, seems boring if somebody says, oh, I think about the past. But if it's actually manifest in sort of a menacing way, then I think it becomes more dramatically compelling.

Hall:

Uh-huh, uh-huh.

Chaon:

And I think that that's what I learned from reading that kind of fiction, is that it -- all of those stories were in many ways extraordinarily political and engaged with, you know, the issues that the authors were interested in. But they were using the supernatural as a vehicle for that. I mean, I don't think -- I guess I don't think any of these stories are particularly supernatural. But I had that idea in mind. I mean, I

really am very -- for personal reasons mostly, but I'm very interested in social class in America. And in writing about that. And, you know, the move up and the move down and all of those things.

Hall:

Yes, and that's so in these stories. Anne and I kind of have this pet theory that the short story really wants to be about class always. Or it in some ways is always interested in class. In a way that maybe -- even when it doesn't seem to be about class, it is.

Chaon:

Oh, that's interesting.

Panning:

Mm-hmm.

It always comes back to that.

Hall:

Yes, but it's always somehow about class. And so, you know, I've talked to different people about this, a colleague who's a Marxist. And she said, "Well, of course. Because everything's about class."

Chaon:

Right, right.

Hall:

But I do think there's something about the story genre. Do you have any thoughts on that? I mean, in your work certainly it's an issue, but --

Chaon:

That's so interesting that you would say that. I'd never thought of that before. I mean, I always -- I sort of adhered to the, you know, the Frank O'Connor thing about all short stories being about loneliness. Hmm. I mean, I guess -- I think there are certain sorts of story writers who ignore social class pretty much completely. And then there are others like Cheever and --

Hall:

Updike.

Chaon:

-- Updike and Carver and Alice Munro who, I mean, that's their subject matter. I mean, the short story is about -- I mean, and Sherwood Anderson, for that matter, who's sort of like the -- you know, was always all about figuring out what the class system was about.

Hall:

Yes, yes.

Chaon:

So I mean, that sounds like that could be accurate. In a really interesting way.

Panning:

I think we should do a book on it.

Hall:

Yes, yes.

Chaon:

I think that's a great idea; yes.

Hall:

Yes, let's do an anthology.

Panning:

I want to talk a little bit about craft. And what you -- what do you like about the short story? What do you try to do in it? What do you think it can do? Why are you drawn to writing short stories?

Chaon:

Well, one of the things that I think it can do that I like is that it can get at that particular unexplainable moment in a way that a poem can get at a particular unexplainable moment. When you have some sort of revelation. When something that creates a fruition in your mind happens. And you remember it, but it's hard to explain in a larger context. Like I think with the novel in a certain way you have to have a philosophy of life and what the world is about. And -- whereas short stories are more about not -- about not knowing than they are about knowing.

Panning:

Mm-hmm.

Chaon:

And I feel like for me, not knowing is more interesting than knowing. You know, I hate these journalists -- they're mostly journalists -- who complain about the state of literature today and, you know, like where is our Dickens to tell us what the, you know, what our generation and what our world means? I'm like, that's such a stupid idea, do you know what I mean? I mean like who wants to have -- well, we are living in the Gilded Age right now, and every -- you know, do you know what I mean?

Panning:

Yes, yes.

Chaon:

There's something so dumb and so didactic about that. But people love that stuff. Like, you know, all these people that are sort of like anointed as this generation's X person. You know, or this generation's spokesman.

Panning:

Right.

Chaon:

You know, and then they're supposed to sort of talk about what it means to be part of a generation? Like does anybody really have that experience? Maybe some people do; I don't know.

Hall:

The universal experience, yes.

Chaon:

Right.

Panning:

But we don't need that, because now we have, you know, rows and rows of self-help books and that kind of --

Chaon:

We -- literature needs to do that. But, you know, I don't know, every once in a while somebody like Tom Wolfe will write some sort of self-serving essay in the pages of Harper's where, you know, literature doesn't matter because literature isn't engaged with the, you know, with the big issues of our time."

Panning:

Mm-hmm.

Chaon:

Like, who says? Who decides what the big issues are, you know? I mean, these retards are like -- I'm sorry, like for them the big issue is like Janet Jackson's boob. Like who cares?

Hall:

Right, right.

Panning:

That's so -- maybe, do you think non-fiction, you know the whole burgeoning genre of all the sub-categories of non-fiction is becoming more of a vehicle for guidance in terms of how people want to live?

Chaon:

No. Well, yes -- I mean, I think it's --

Panning:

Because it has to come from somewhere, right?

Chaon:

Well, I think so. But I think that the burgeoning non-fiction has to do with two things. I think it has to do with people's interest in self-help. And people's interest in taking the mantle of victimology from true victims and putting it on themselves. I hate -- this is -- maybe this is really mean. But --

Hall:

Let it out; bring it on.

Chaon:

Okay, I'm going to. Like -- there's a sort of sub-genre of books about fairly wealthy people who go into rehab because they're alcoholics. And then come out and they're -- you know, they've suffered. And very often in rehab they meet working-class people and are sort of ennobled by that experience. And I feel like it's, you know, it's like if you want to talk about class war, it's like the rich get to take finally the very last thing that poor people have, which is their suffering. And take it for themselves. Like I may be rich, I may be privileged with every single thing in the world, but I suffered because I did too many drugs and screwed up my life. I'm like --

Hall:

So hear me out.

Chaon:

And you know, I hate those books. I hate those books. And I hate that process of, you know, claiming suffering for yourself. And then like display -- and then putting it on display.

Panning:

But what about the "Angela's Ashes," the "Mary Karr," -- I mean the ones that are actual, honest --

Chaon:

I actually respect those books more.

Hall:

Yes.

Chaon:

But I -- but the burgeoning in --

Hall:

There are a lot of alcohol rehab --

Chaon:

It's like I'm looking for -- let's see, where did I -- how were things bad for me so I can cash in? You know, I'm not --

Panning:

So there's no guidance there.

Chaon:

I don't think -- I don't find -- I find the guidance is to sort of look for the place that you've suffered, contemplate it. And that ennobles you. And I don't find that to be guidance, I find that to be sort of horrible narcissism.

Hall:

Mm-hmm.

Panning

Can I say that --

Chaon:

Am I being -- I'm being such a jerk. I'm so sorry.

Panning:

No, this is what we want. Could I guess then that you don't read a lot of sort of memoir, autobiography, typically?

Chaon:

Don't read a lot. There are some people that I really like that write non-fiction. But not so much memoir.

Panning:

Mm-hmm.

Because you know what? We need -- I'm teaching this creative essay class right now. And we need more essay, we need sort of more Thoreau and Emersonian kind of --

Chaon:

Yeah. I mean I like to --

Panning:

-- people to --

Chaon:

Like somebody like John D'Agata --

Panning:

-- construct, yes.

Chaon:

-- I think has a really interesting point of view. I think he writes about his engagement with the world in an incredibly interesting way. And, you know, it's not sort of about here was my, you know, my sad childhood stuff. Which I don't find that interesting. Even though -- hey, look at me, I'm writing about sad childhoods.

Panning:

Well, there is something about the translation of the scenes into fiction.

Chaon:

Yes, I think so too.

Panning:

And poetry that I have to admit too there's a hierarchy in terms of what we like. What I like. But before we run out of too much time, I do want to circle back to the novel. I was asking about the short story.

Chaon:

Mm-hmm.

Panning:

So then you've entered into novel, which is the inevitable path, it seems like, right?

Chaon:

Right, right.

Panning:

If you want to make the literary current fiction, you --

Chaon:

And it was -- it was not even really -- well, I mean obviously we always have choices. But when they bought -- when Ballantine bought "Among the Missing," they bought it with the understanding that my next book would be a novel. And that, you know, I would be producing that immediately.

Panning:

So how -- can you talk about the process? Because last night when we had dinner we were talking about your -- it just sort of came up, your work habits being -- you called yourself undisciplined. But then you went on to say that you work simultaneously on maybe ten things at the same time. But then it could take you up to years to finish even a short story.

Chaon:

Mm-hmm. Little pieces.

Panning:

How does that -- how did that work with the novel project? I'm really curious to know.

Chaon:

Well, you'll -- I mean, when you eventually read the novel you'll see it's very fragmentary. The novel is very fragmentary. I actually mapped it out pretty early on.

Panning:

Mm-hmm. More charts.

Hall:

Chart, chart.

Chaon:

In an artificial -- in a totally artificial way, I knew that there would be three parts with 12 chapters each.

Panning:

Oh, that's nice.

Chaon:

And so I had those -- I had actually, I did have a chart. And so when I realized what like say part one chapter six was going to be, I put it on my chart. And then I started writing that chapter. And then pretty soon I had all of these -- like my whole chart was marked with, you know, maybe 20 of the 36 chapters. That I knew what they were going to be. And I, you know, and I had started writing them in the same way. Like I was doing them a little bit at a time. And then, you know, I sort of had a general idea of what the plot was going to be. But the last few chapters, I didn't know what was going to happen at the end of the novel until I actually wrote those last few chapters. And those were the ones I kind of avoided until the end.

Panning:

So you wrote different chapters simultaneously?

Chaon:

Mm-hmm.

Panning:

You're saying -- you were saying you get up, look at some TV, check the mail, write some more, --

Chaon:

Mm-hmm, yes. I mean, there are --

Panning:

Right, so you could have multiple chapters going at the same time?

Chaon:

Oh, yes. Well, there are -- but there are five different point-of-view characters.

Hall:

Amazing.

Hall:

Oh.

Chaon:

And I mean it's sort of like the Hours, except with redneck guys instead of Virginia Woolf and lesbians.

And so --

Hall:

Now who will play those parts [Inaudible] when they make it into the movie?

Hall:

Well, I hope Nicole Kidman will put on some more prosthetics for this, for Jonah. But yes, I mean, I -- it happens in different time periods. A lot of the book happens in sort of simultaneously running but separate time periods. And it bounces off -- the events in 1973 bounce off events in 1993, bounce off the events in 1963. You know, so I had those like five point-of-view characters that I was bouncing back and forth between. And point-of-view times, too, so --

Panning:

So you could sort of use your short story strategy in doing this. That makes sense now, but when you told me about it last night I thought, how could a person write a novel that way? I just can't -- I still think it's an amazing juggle that you're able to sort of mentally keep that --

Chaon:

Well, I mean -- my next thing is that I'm going to write, or I'm going to try to write one of those really perfect like 250-page short novels like "The Great Gatsby."

Panning:

With just one point of view?

Chaon:

With just one point of view. One sort of, like happens over a period of three weeks. I don't think I can do it. But --

Panning:

Wouldn't that be nice?

Chaon:

-- but I'm going to try to do it.

Hall:

What a great structure, though.

Chaon:

Yes.

Hall:

Short. Sweet. Maybe instead of the billboard in Great Gatsby, you can have one of the misread signs that you're always coming across.

Chaon:

Yes, that's true.

Hall:

Yes.

Panning:

How long did that one take you, the novel?

Chaon:

It took me 2-1/2 years. But I had someone nipping at my heels the whole time. Which was good. Which was good, but it would have taken me a lot longer. And in fact I may not have ever finished it if I didn't have that person nipping at my heels.

Panning:

Editor?

Chaon:

Yes, the editor.

Hall:

What that while you were teaching too? Writing and teaching?

Chaon:

Mm-hmm.

Hall:

Wow.

Chaon:

Yes. I mean, I had this -- I had these characters in my mind and I had this -- the story in my mind for a long time before -- before I'd begun to write it. Partially because it's, you know, it's about issues that are, you know, that sort of have reflections in my own life and that are from near and dear to me, including the class stuff. And including, you know, parent and child relationships and adoption, that sort of thing. So it's got all those elements in it. And I feel like maybe -- I've maybe gotten through all of those things now and I'm finished with them. That was -- that's a good thing about a novel, is like you have this obsession that maybe you'll work forever within the short story form with, but in a novel you can pretty much fit and say everything that you have to say about that obsession.

Hall:

And then move on?

Chaon:

Maybe, maybe move on. I'm hoping. I think maybe I'll -- I don't know what I'm going to do next. But it will be -- it will be another step.

Panning:

Is that a good feeling or a bad feeling to you? That adrift between project feeling? Do you find that liberating? Or panicky? Or what?

Chaon:

I have a -- I guess I find it very peaceful. It's sort of like having retired, you know? Or finding out that you're going to die in a few months.

Hall:

Yes, right, right.

Chaon:

You're just like oh, okay. It's the end.

Panning:

Right, yes.

Chaon:

Because you never think you're going to write another thing. I mean, I'm at the point where I don't think I'm going to be able to write another thing. But I know I have to, because I already took the money.

Panning:

Right, the money's there. I want to ask a quick thing, because we're getting close to the end.

Chaon:

Okay.

Panning:

National Book Award nomination, reviews, reports from other people -- how do these things hit you? And first of all, how did -- you know, when you found out about the National Book Award nomination, obviously that opened doors, we talked a little bit about that.

Chaon:

Oh, yes.

Panning:

How has it affected your writing life?

Chaon:

Well, I mean it was totally ridiculous. And, you know, like one of those things where it's just like you have this incredible stroke of luck for whatever reason. And, you know, you just have to run with it. I have a feeling -- I mean, you know, it will probably never happen again. And, you know, the first thing I thought when I found out about it was one, that they were lying to me. And then two, like oh, now I know what they're going to put -- what my obituary would say [laughs]. National Book Award finalist Dan Chaon died today. But anyway, I mean -- I guess the only way that it's changed my life, my writing life, is that now I feel like I'm occasionally privy to that weird stuff that I didn't have to deal with before. Like people asking me for blurbs. Like, which is --

Panning:

Do you do it? Are you a blurber?

Chaon:

I do. Yes, I do. I mean, I -- one of my friends told me that I was a blurb whore, which is --

Panning:

You -- so you can't say no?

Chaon:

I have a really hard time saying no. Because no -- because people were nice to me.

Hall:

Right, right.

Chaon:

I mean, I got really nice blurbs from them. And I was like -- Right, right. I know.

Hall:

Yes, Lorrie Moore.

Panning:

And on your novel you have Jane Hamilton and all kinds of good people.

Chaon:

Elizabeth McCracken. And, yes, some really nice people. So I'm -- but, yes, so -- oh, I shouldn't probably like encourage people to, because I've got like a stack of six books. At least --

Panning:

And here's his phone number [laughs].

Chaon:

I mean, I suppose that's one thing that's changed. And then, you know, like I can sort of see over the fence into like the cool kids club. It makes writing a little bit more like high school, which I don't -- that's the one part I don't like.

Hall:

Oh, dear.

Panning:

Oh, in that what? In that you now are in the scene?

Chaon:

Well, I now -- you know, like there are -- I now sort of have had encounters or know some of the cool kids. And I know like, you know, like

my editor sort of has the expectation that I will eventually become one of the cool kids. But I kind of --

Panning:

And will you?

Chaon:

No, I don't think I will. I don't think I will.

Panning:

You won't? Maybe you already have.

Hall:

Maybe you are.

Chaon:

Well, you know what I mean, like somebody that's won a Pulitzer or somebody that's had a bestseller like Michael Chabon or Jeffrey Eugenides or Jonathan Lethem, or --

Panning:

Yes, are these your buddies now?

Chaon:

Well, I know Chabon. Chaybon, sorry; I always call him Chabone. Chabon. Just through email. And, you know, I know a few of these people. But then Jonathan Franzen, and there's another one. You know, like people that have had like, have done the great American novel and have had that big, like national Diane Rehm, Terry Gross book, TV sort of success. Where, you know, somebody at the Rochester Country Club would recognize their name.

Panning:

Mm-hmm. But you know what? You have -- you know, your books -- the short story reissue, National Book Award finalist, now a novel. You know, you may --

Chaon:

Yes, but it's not something that I --

Panning:

-- you may be there.

Chaon:

-- it's not something that I particularly long for. I mean, that's -- but it's a weird thing, I think. That particular aspect of the literary world.

Panning:

Mmm, yes.

To end out, though, speaking about the novel. I'm just going to ask you to read a brief passage to conclude.

Chaon:

Okay. This is -- I guess this somewhat ties things up. It was maybe the first time he'd held a baby. He sat down on the kitchen chair and Halladay lowered baby Henry into his arms. And he actually felt weirdly shaky. There was a weight of the past. The baby's large eyes settled on him, and though this had been one of his happiest nights in his whole life, it made him melancholy. He had read somewhere that babies are instinctively drawn to faces, and that they will fixate even on drawings or abstract face-like shapes and round objects with markings that might resemble eyes, mouth, nose. It was information that struck him as terribly sad, terribly lonely. To imagine the infants of the world scoping the blurry atmosphere above them for faces the way primitive people scrutinized the stars for patterns. The way castaways stare at the moon, or the blinking of a satellite. It made him sad to think of the

baby gathering information, a mind, a soul, slowly solidifying around these impressions. Coming to understand cause-and-effect. Coming out of a blank or fog into reality, into a reality. The true terror, Jonah thought, the true mystery of life was not that we are all going to die, but that we were all born. That we were all once little babies like this, unknowing and slowly reeling in the world. Gathering it loop by loop like a ball of string. The true terror was that once we didn't exist, and then through no fault of our own, we had to.

Panning:

Thank you. And I'd like to thank you both for coming and talking with us today. Good luck with the novel.

Chaon:

Sure; yaay, thanks.